MARVEL

KNIGHTS

MAR

#4

HERE COMES...

DAREDEVIL

THE MAN WITHOUT FEAR!

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SINCE COMING-TO IN THE HOSPITAL AFTER THE ACCIDENT THAT TOOK HIS SIGHT, THE ONE CONSTANT COMPANION IN MATT MURDOCK'S LIFE HAS BEEN THE NEVERENDING DIN OF PULSES THAT SURROUND HIM.

AS THE SIGHTED CANNOT ESCAPE THE VISUAL BARRAGE OF THE WAKING WORLD, SO IT IS THAT -- THANKS TO THE DUBIOUS GIFT OF HIS HEIGHTENED SENSES WHICH WERE THE RESULT OF SAID ACCIDENT --

MATT MURDOCK (AKA DAREDEVIL) IS FOREVER INUNDATED BY THE BIO-RHYTHMS OF BLOOD RACING THROUGH BEATING HEARTS AND COURSING THROUGH EVEN THE SMALLEST OF VEINS.

WHAT THE SIGHTED FAIL TO REALIZE IS THAT EVERY HEARTBEAT IS A SIGNATURE -- A FINGERPRINT THAT CAN BE USED TO IDENTIFY ONE INDIVIDUAL IN A SEA OF MILLIONS.

MATT MURDOCK HAS JUST IDENTIFIED TWO OF THOSE HEARTBEATS.

ONE HE'S HEARD RACE AND CALM COUNTLESS TIMES -- BOTH IN THE COURSE OF BATTLE AND IN THE HEAT OF PASSION.

IT'S OFTEN REPRESENTED HIS OWN PRIVATE HEAVEN.

THE OTHER HAS BEEN THE HARBINGER OF THE DURESS HIS LIFE HAS UNDERGONE IN THE PAST FEW DAYS.

IT'S COME TO REPRESENT HIS OWN PRIVATE HELL.

MY LOVE...

STAN LEE presents DAREDEVIL in

GUARDIAN DEVIL

PART FOUR

THE DEVIL'S DISTAFF

KEVIN SMITH
TALKIN' DIRTY

JOE QUESADA
DRAWING DIRTY PICTURES

JIMMY PALMIOTTI
GETTING DIRTY WHILE INKING

AVALON STUDIOS' LAURA'n'DREW
COLORING WITH DIRTY BRUSHES

RICHARD STARKINGS and COMICRAFT'S LIZ AGRAPHIOTIS
USING DIRTY LETTERS

JOE QUESADA and JIMMY PALMIOTTI
JUST PLAIN DIRTY

NANCI DAKESIAN
THINKING DIRTY THOUGHTS

BOB HARRAS
CLEANING UP THE WHOLE MESS!

DIDN'T YOUR MOTHER EVER TELL YOU NOT TO PLAY IN TRAFFIC?

YOUR MOTHER... I FORGOT. I APOLOGIZE, MATTHEW.

WH... WHAT HAPPENED?

YOU WERE ALMOST MOWED DOWN BY A VERY LARGE TRUCK, IS WHAT HAPPENED. LUCKY FOR YOU I WAS SWINGING BY AT THE TIME.

THE AIM IS TO HAVE A STREET NAMED *AFTER* YOU, DEAREST -- NOT TO BE MASHED INTO THE ASPHALT OF ONE.

I WAS BEING HELD PRISONER SOMEWHERE... A WHITE ROOM...

A *'WHITE ROOM'* WOULD SEEM APPROPRIATE, CONSIDERING YOUR BEHAVIOR LATELY.

WHO WAS HOLDING YOU CAPTIVE?

THE DEVIL... I THINK...

I DON'T KNOW... I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ANYMORE.

I WENT TO YOUR APARTMENT. YOUR... GIRLFRIEND... WAS THERE -- CRYING IN YOUR BED.

OH GOD, KAREN! DID SHE SEE YOU?

NO -- I SAW HER THROUGH YOUR WINDOW. I THOUGHT IT BEST NOT TO SAY HELLO -- CONSIDERING I'M THE EX-LOVER WITH A BABY STRAPPED TO MY BACK.

SHE DID NOT LOOK... SETTLED, LOUBOV. PERHAPS THERE IS SOMETHING YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE WITH ME?

WHERE WOULD I START? BETWEEN HER AND FOGGY...

FRANKLIN, YES. HE'S ALL OVER THE NEWS... AS WAS YOUR RESIGNATION FROM THE FIRM. THE MEDIA HAS TAKEN IT AS A SIGN OF HIS GUILT.

MY LOVE -- WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOUR LIFE?

MY LIFE... I'M HAVING THE WORSE FIT OF DEJA VU. HORRIBLE MEMORIES... OF FISK. AND HOW HE DESTROYED MY LIFE ONCE... PIECE BY PIECE.

DO YOU HAVE ENEMIES -- BEYOND THE COSTUMED VARIETY? THOSE WHO MIGHT SEEK TO DESTROY THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK?

THE ONLY ENEMY IT WOULD SEEM THAT IS BEHIND THIS, IS RIDING SHOTGUN ON YOUR BACK.

MATTHEW, PLEASE! I KNOW YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH A GREAT DEAL --

-- BUT FOCUSING YOUR CONFUSION AND RAGE ON THE CHILD AS YOU HAVE IS BEYOND FORGIVENESS!

SHE'S RIGHT.

OR IS SHE?

MY JUDGMENT -- IT'S BEEN CLOUDED BEFORE. BY LOVE. OR LUST. THE TYPHOID MARY AFFAIR LEAPS TO MIND. KAREN'S BETRAYAL TOO.

MATTHEW? MATTHEW, ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?

THEY'VE ALWAYS BEEN MY DOWNFALL. IT'S THE CURSE OF THE MURDOCK MEN -- WE HANG OUR HEARTS ON THE WRONG WOMEN. OFTEN WITH POOR RESULTS.

ALWAYS WITH POOR RESULTS.

HOW HAVE *YOU* BEEN, NATASHA? NOTHING... UNFORTUNATE... GOING ON IN YOUR LIFE?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN? NO -- NOTHING'S WRONG WITH ME. MATT, YOU'RE HURT, LET ME GET YOU TO...

AND NATASHA -- WHAT MAKES HER ANY DIFFERENT THAN THE REST? SHE'S NEVER PROVEN VERY FAITHFUL. HOW MANY TIMES HAS SHE THROWN HERSELF AT TONY STARK? "LIBERAL", SOME OF THE AVENGERS HAVE CALLED HER.

I'D BET THEY'VE CALLED HER WORSE BEHIND HER BACK.

TO WHERE, NATASHA? SOMEWHERE I CAN GET HELP, PERHAPS?

YES -- YES, WE SHOULD GET YOU SOME HELP. YOU'RE NOT WELL...

NO -- NO, I'M NOT. HAVEN'T BEEN... NOT FOR A FEW DAYS, NOW.

WHY AM I TRUSTING HER IN THE FIRST PLACE? THE CHILD'S BEEN IN HER CARE FOR THE LAST DAY, AND NOTHING BAD'S BEFALLEN HER. PERHAPS SHE'S BEEN LUCKY...

OR IN ON IT.

I THINK YOU SHOULD STAY BACK, MATTHEW. YOU'RE MAKING ME NERVOUS, AND YOU SHOULD STAY AWAY FROM US.

THERE! IN DEFENSE OF HER TWISTED PARCEL. SHE'S READY TO ATTACK ME TO PROTECT IT -- TO PROTECT THE EVIL SHE CARRIES.

SHOULD'VE NEVER TRUSTED HER. SHE'S A SPY -- A ONE-TIME COMMUNIST, SENT TO THIS COUNTRY YEARS BACK BY A GODLESS GOVERNMENT TO INFILTRATE AND REPORT ON OUR NATION'S SECRETS.

SHE TURNED ON MOTHER RUSSIA, DIDN'T SHE? AND DON'T OLD HABITS DIE HARD? WHO'S TO SAY SHE'S NOT BETRAYING MANKIND?

HOW MUCH DID THEY GET YOU FOR, NATASHA? WHAT PRICE DID THEY OFFER FOR YOUR SOUL?

DON'T MAKE ME DO THIS, MATT... PLEASE...

YOU CERTAINLY HAD ME FOOLED. I DIDN'T EVEN THINK TO QUESTION THE TIMELINESS WITH WHICH YOU SHOWED UP AT MY APARTMENT...

YOU CALLED *ME!* MATTHEW, I LOVE YOU!

BUT BETRAYAL IS A WOMAN, ISN'T IT? THEY BIRTHED IT IN THE GARDEN AND HAVE PASSED IT DOWN FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION EVER SINCE -- TEACHING THEIR SUCCESSORS THE ART OF THE UNTRUTH... THE BEAUTY OF DECEPTION. SATAN'S THEIR FATHER...

GIVE ME THE KID, NATASHA.

MATT, DON'T MAKE ME DO THIS... PLEASE...

...AND THE BLACK WIDOW IS DADDY'S LITTLE GIRL!

YOU'VE ALREADY DONE IT, WOMAN...

BUT I'M HERE TO *UNDO* IT!

I LOOK BACK ON MY LIFE AND IT'S LITTERED WITH THE LIES WOMEN HAVE TOLD ME. LIES THAT HAVE BLACKENED MY SOUL.

WELL, IT'S TIME TO DELIVER A LESSON IN TRUTH.

AND TRUTH...

WELL, TRUTH IS PAIN.

AAUGGHH!

SO MUCH, SO WRONG, IN SUCH A SHORT TIME... AND IT ALL COMES BACK TO YOU.

IT CAN END AS QUICKLY AS IT'S STARTED. I CAN MAKE IT ALL RIGHT AGAIN.

NO ONE TO SAVE YOU THIS TIME, LITTLE BEAST.

LOOK AT HER -- ALREADY UNCONSCIOUS. SUCH A MINIMAL PAIN THRESHOLD. NO WONDER SHE COULDN'T LEAD THE AVENGERS.

NO ONE TO SAVE US.

CAN'T THINK STRAIGHT...

EVERYTHING'S A BLUR...

NOTHING MAKES SENSE...

CAN'T SEE WHAT'S RIGHT...

WHAT'S WRONG...

FALLING FAST...

FATHER...

FORGNE ME...

NO...

NOT FATHER.

FLIP

CLK

WHZZ

CHKK

TOO CLOSE. ANGLE'S WRONG. NO GOOD. BRACE FOR IMPACT. SHIELD THE KID.

LUCKY, DEVIL -- SOMEONE'S ON YOUR SIDE.

NOTHING VITAL DAMAGED. HIP TOOK MOST OF THE BLOW, BUT THAT SAME RIB WENT AGAIN. FEEL LIKE DEATH... BUT STILL ALIVE.

THE BABY'S IN ONE PIECE, TOO. KID SEEMS TO BE ENJOYING ALL THIS. MAKES ME YEARN FOR THE CAREFREE DAYS OF MY OWN CHILDHOOD... BEFORE THE ISOTOPE.

THE PAIN SHOOTS DOWN MY SIDE -- REMINDING ME THAT CHILDHOOD WAS A LONG TIME AGO. TAKES LONGER TO HEAL NOW, OLD MAN.

HURTS LIKE THE DEVIL. CAN'T STOP, THOUGH -- GOTTA FIND THE ONE PERSON WHO MIGHT GIVE ME SOME PERSPECTIVE ON ALL THIS... WHO MIGHT HELP ME GET CLEAR.

PLEASE, GOD... LET HER STILL BE HERE... LOSING IT... NATASHA... I'M SORRY...

REUNIONS... WHY DO WE ALWAYS WAIT... FOR THE WORST TIMES... KAREN...

AND SUDDENLY, IT'S NOT SO DARK ANYMORE... FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS, I FEEL THE GROUND BENEATH ME... BUT IT'S CALLING ME...

MOTHER...

HELP ME...

TWO DAYS LATER, SOMEWHERE UPTOWN...

THIS GROWS IRRITATING --

-- AFTER OVER A YEAR OF STRATEGIC PLOTTING AND THE VAST FORTUNE IT'S TAKEN TO CRAFT THIS, MY SWAN-SONG...

... TO BE THWARTED BY OUR FOOT-SOLDIERS' INABILITY TO LOCATE A BLIND MAN AND A BABY!

HE'S NOT DEAD, OF THAT I'M SURE. NO -- HE'S THE RESILIENT SORT. LIKE MY OLD FRIEND, THE ARACHNID. THESE PEOPLE NEVER SEEM TO GIVE UP THE GHOST.

THE ARACHNID... COULD I HAVE BROKEN HIM THIS EASILY?

IT IS OF LITTLE CONSEQUENCE. I WILL HAVE MY VICTORY OVER MY ADOPTED FOE INSTEAD.

AND WHEN DAREDEVIL LIES BROKEN AT MY FEET, I SHALL PASS FROM THIS WORLD WITH THE AWE I WAS NEVER AFFORDED IN LIFE.

AND OH, HOW THEY'LL WHISPER MY NAME REVERENTLY, IN PLACE OF THE SNICKERING THEY OFFERED THROUGHOUT MY CAREER.

TK

EVEN FISK, THAT BLOATED STREET-THUG.

HOW WRONG HE WAS. IT'S NOT HOPE -- IT'S FAITH THAT CAN DESTROY EVEN THE MOST VALIANT OF HEROES. I WILL SHOW HIM THAT A MAN WITHOUT FEAR, IS A MAN WITHOUT FAITH. AND A MAN WITHOUT FAITH...

... IS EASILY UNMADE.

KTOK

THE ENDGAME IS FAST APPROACHING, MISTER GABRIEL.

SUMMON THE ASSASSIN.

FEELS LIKE I'VE BEEN SLEEPING FOR DAYS. WHERE AM I?

OH YES -- NOW I REMEMBER.

FEEL FAMILIAR?

YOU'RE AWAKE -- GOOD. YOU'VE SLEPT FOR A SOLID TWO DAYS STRAIGHT. YOU MUST BE EXTREMELY HUNGRY.

I'LL GET YOU SOMETHING TO EAT.

I'M NOT VERY HUNGRY, THANKS.

WASN'T I IN A DIFFERENT ROOM THE LAST TIME I WAS HERE?

YES -- THE DOWNSTAIRS WARD.

THIS IS... MY ROOM.

THAT MUST BE CAUSING SOMETHING OF A SCANDAL -- UNLESS YOU'VE TAKEN TO LETTING OTHER GARISHLY CLAD VIGILANTES INTO YOUR INNER SANCTUM AS OF LATE.

IF YOU'RE NOT CAREFUL, THEY'LL START CALLING YOU "SISTER MAGGIE LEOTARD."

SPEAKING OF WHICH, WHERE'S MY COSTUME?

I'VE WASHED IT. IT'S HANGING IN THE CLOSET.

IT'S QUITE A HEAVY GARMENT. HOW CAN YOU... DO THE THINGS YOU DO... UNDER SO MUCH WEIGHT?

ARE YOU SPEAKING LITERALLY OR FIGURATIVELY, MOTHER?

HER HEART SKIPS A BEAT. I'VE HEARD THIS ONCE BEFORE.

OH NO, CHILD -- I'M NOT A MOTHER SUPERIOR. I'M JUST A SISTER...

LET'S NOT PLAY THIS GAME AGAIN. CAN'T WE DISPENSE WITH THE CHARADE -- JUST THIS ONCE?

HER HEARTBEAT RACES SLIGHTLY, THEN SLOWS AGAIN.

AND FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ALMOST THIRTY YEARS...

...I'M LOOKING AT MY MOTHER AGAIN.

YOU'RE AS DIRECT AS YOUR FATHER WAS.

THERE'S *A LOT* OF YOUR FATHER IN YOU, ACTUALLY. YOU REMIND ME OF HIM.

I'M SURE THE BABY ONLY ADDS TO THAT. IF I REMEMBER CORRECTLY, DAD WAS LEFT WITH A KID ONCE TOO -- WASN'T HE?

IS THIS WHAT YOU WANT, MATTHEW? ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS I HAVEN'T ALLOWED MYSELF TO THINK ABOUT IN ALMOST THIRTY YEARS?

I'M SORRY, BUT I'VE SPENT ALL MY GUILT ON THE MATTER LONG AGO.

GOD GRANTED ME THAT MUCH.

AT LEAST GOD HAS EXTENDED SOME OF HIS COURTESIES TO *ONE* OF THE MURDOCKS. HE CERTAINLY DIDN'T LAVISH ANY ON DAD OR ME.

SON OR NOT, I WON'T TOLERATE ANY BLASPHEMY FROM YOU, MATTHEW!

GOD FORBID YOU CHOOSE YOUR OWN BLOOD OVER YOUR FAITH. IT'S NEVER BEEN YOUR STYLE, HAS IT?

SUCH ANGER FROM SOMEONE WHO'S BEEN GIVEN SO MUCH!

DARKNESS, MOTHER! THAT'S WHAT I'VE BEEN GIVEN -- A LIFE OF DARKNESS!

SEEING DARKNESS, FIGHTING DARKNESS, *FEELING* DARKNESS!

YOU'LL HAVE TO ***EXCUSE ME*** IF ***I CAN'T*** FIND THE SAME FAITH IN THE SO-CALLED ALMIGHTY THAT YOU'VE FOUND! BUT THEN, I GUESS IT'S EASY FOR YOU TO JUMP TO HIS DEFENSE!

AFTER ALL -- HE LET YOU OFF THE HOOK PRETTY EASILY, DIDN'T HE!

SLAP

Oh GOD...

Oh GOD, I'M SORRY...

SHE GIVES ME SOME CLOTHES THAT'VE BEEN DONATED TO THE MISSION AND MAKES ME SOME TEA.

IT ALMOST MAKES ME CRY.

I TALK FOR HOURS. UNFORTUNATELY, IT'S ABOUT NONE OF THE THINGS I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO ASK HER -- IT'S ALL ABOUT THE CHILD AND THE EVENTS OF THE PAST WEEK.

I TELL HER I'M NOT SURE WHO TO BELIEVE ANYMORE -- WHO TO TRUST.

FINALLY, SHE SAYS...

DID YOU ASK GOD?

MA -- MAYBE IN YOUR WORLD, THAT'S AN OPTION. HOWEVER, IN THE *REAL* WORLD...

DON'T BE GLIB, MATTHEW.

SORRY, MA'AM.

I KNOW YOUR FATHER RAISED YOU IN THE FAITH.

I ALSO KNOW AFTER READING ABOUT YOUR TWO LIVES OVER THE YEARS THAT YOU WORK ON THE SIDE OF THE JUST.

YOU'RE AN ANGEL, MATTHEW -- NOT ONE OF THE HEAVENLY HOST, GRANTED, BUT A SERVANT OF GOD NONETHELESS. AS SUCH, PLACING YOUR TRUST IN HIM SHOULDN'T TAKE THAT GREAT A LEAP OF FAITH.

ASK GOD WHAT TO BELIEVE.

I,,, I CAN'T.

MOM -- I'M NOT SURE GOD EXISTS ANYMORE

MATTHEW -- YOU'RE TOO MATURE TO GET MIRED IN *THAT* OLD CHESTNUT. AFTER ALL THE THINGS YOU'VE DONE, AND ALL THE THINGS YOU'VE SEEN...

FIGURATIVELY...

HOW CAN YOU EVEN *RAISE* THAT QUESTION ANYMORE?

HOW CAN YOU *NOT?*

LOOK BACK AT YOUR LIFE, MOM -- LOOK AT ALL YOUR LOSS. LOOK AT THE PEOPLE YOU MINISTER TO -- THE BROKEN, THE DESTITUTE.

GOOD PEOPLE, I'M SURE, WHO'VE FALLEN ON HARD TIMES, WHILE PEOPLE LIKE THE KINGPIN HAVE PROSPERED -- SOMETIMES OFF THE MISERY OF THE VERY PEOPLE YOU AID!

AFTER EVERYTHING WE'VE BOTH BEEN THROUGH, *HOW* CAN YOU SIT THERE AND DEFEND THE NOTION OF AN ALL-LOVING DEITY WHO'S PREPARING A PLACE IN HIS MAGIC KINGDOM FOR YOU, WHERE ALL THE WRONGS OF YOUR LIFE WILL BE MADE RIGHT?

IT'S A *FAIRY TALE*, ISN'T IT? A JOKE DEVISED A LONG TIME AGO TO KEEP THE DOWNTRODDEN FROM REVOLTING -- TO KEEP THEM *COMPLIANT!*

A JOKE THAT EVEN ALLOWED YOU TO ESCAPE THE GUILT OF ABANDONING YOUR OWN SON!

I EXPECT A VERBAL THRASHING; PERHAPS ANOTHER SLAP. INSTEAD, I HEAR MY MOTHER -- THE SAINTLY SISTER MAGGIE -- SMILE.

AND THAT SMILE...THAT SMILE COMES FROM SOMEPLACE I ONLY WISH I WAS MORE ACQUAINTED WITH. I FEEL HER CALM FILL THE ROOM, AND IT QUELLS MY SELF-INDUCED RAGE SOMEHOW. ALL I CAN THINK TO SAY IS...

HOW CAN YOU JUST... *KNOW*... LIKE YOU DO?

I WANT TO TELL YOU A STORY, MATTHEW. THAT'S SOMETHING I'M ALWAYS SORRY I MISSED WHEN I ENTERED THE CONVENT -- THE SIMPLE JOY OF TELLING MY CHILD STORIES.

THIS STORY IS ABOUT A *KNIGHT* AND A *MONK.*

THEY'RE TRAVELING TOGETHER SILENTLY FOR QUITE SOME TIME, UNTIL FINALLY THE KNIGHT SAYS --

"You live a life of poverty, never knowing the touch of a woman, denying yourself all manner of delights -- all because you believe there is a God. I do not share your faith, so I tear the marrow from the bones of Life, indulging myself at every opportunity. I've broken every law created by man and church, and I fear no consequence, because I don't believe in your God."

"MY QUESTION, HOWEVER, IS THIS --

"What if life ends in the ground, and man is nothing more than meat for worms. You will have wasted your entire life denying yourself for nothing. What if you die and learn there is no God?"

The monk thought about this and shrugged his shoulders, offering, "Then I suppose I will be sad. But tell me this, sir..."

"... WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DIE...

"... AND YOU FIND OUT THERE IS?"

AND WITH A SIMPLE PARABLE, TOLD AT A MOTHER'S KNEE --

-- I'M A CHILD AGAIN.

THERE'S SOMEONE WHO'S BEEN WAITING TO SEE YOU. SHE'S DOWNSTAIRS. SHE CAME THIS MORNING BEFORE YOU WOKE UP. SHE SAYS SHE "HAD A FEELING" YOU'D BE HERE.

BUT I MUST TELL YOU, SON...

"-- SHE SEEMS VERY DISTRESSED."

KAREN?

OH, MATT -- ARE YOU OKAY? YOU LOOK...

BRUISED, YES. BUT OTHERWISE FINE. HOW DID YOU KNOW I WAS HERE?

WE SHARED A *BANK ACCOUNT*, MATT -- A GIRL *NOTICES* THINGS LIKE MONTHLY CHECKS TO A "*CLINTON MISSION SHELTER*".

NOW YOU KNOW -- THERE WAS ALWAYS ANOTHER WOMAN. IT'S A TRAGIC ROMANCE, REALLY -- I LOVE HER, BUT SHE LOVES THIS GUY WITH LONG HAIR AND A BEARD.

MATT, THE *BABY* -- WHERE IS IT?

UPSTAIRS. WHY?

I NEED YOU TO GIVE IT TO ME.

I MEAN -- I'M BETTER SUITED TO TAKE CARE OF IT THAN A BUNCH OF *NUNS*, DON'T YOU THINK?

BESIDES -- THIS PLACE IS TOO *DEPRESSING* AN ENVIRONMENT FOR A BABY.

I WAS GOING TO ASK YOU, BUT I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT HAVE... TOO MUCH ON YOUR MIND ALREADY, WITHOUT HAVING TO BABYSIT SOME KID.

DON'T BE *SILLY*, MATT. A SWEET LITTLE BABY'D TAKE MY MIND OFF MY... *PROBLEMS*.

GREAT. I WAS COMING HOME ANYWAY. GIVE ME *TWO MINUTES* TO...

OH...

OH NO, KAREN... NOT *YOU*...

I NEVER *TOLD* YOU ABOUT THE BABY.

WHAT? OF COURSE YOU DID. THAT NIGHT -- WHEN I GOT BACK, AND I TOLD YOU ABOUT...

YOU CRIED YOURSELF TO SLEEP. I LEFT EARLY THE NEXT MORNING TO SEE FOGGY.

I *NEVER* TOLD YOU ABOUT THE BABY.

GOOD GOD, KAREN -- WHO *GOT* TO YOU?

YOUR *FRIEND* -- THE OLD MAN. HE CAME TO OUR APARTMENT, AND TOLD ME ABOUT THE CURSE. HE SAID THE BABY'S RESPONSIBLE FOR *EVERYTHING:* FOGGY, YOU...

...MY INFECTION.

HE SAID... HE SAID I MIGHT HAVE EVEN INFECTED *YOU,* MATT.

I DIDN'T ALLOW MYSELF TO THINK ABOUT IT THE NIGHT KAREN TOLD ME. WITH ALL THAT'S HAPPENED OVER THE LAST WEEK, I'VE AVOIDED DWELLING ON IT.

BUT SHE'S JUST BROUGHT IT ALL HOME.

BUT ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS GIVE HIM THE BABY, MATT! IF WE GIVE HIM THE BABY, ALL THE EVIL GOES AWAY!

THAT'S WHAT YOUR FRIEND SAID! IF WE GIVE HIM THE BABY...

NO!!

YOU'RE BEING *PLAYED,* KAREN! HE'S PLAYING YOU -- LIKE HE TRIED TO PLAY ME!

LIKE HE *DID* PLAY ME! BUT MY HEAD IS CLEAR NOW! THAT BABY IS STAYING IN MY CARE UNTIL I FIND OUT *EXACTLY* WHAT THE STORY IS!

BUT IT'S *EVIL!* IT'S RUINING OUR LIVES! LOOK AT ME! I HAVE *AIDS.* BECAUSE OF THAT BABY!

YOU HAVE AIDS. BECAUSE YOU WERE A **JUNKIE,** KAREN! A JUNKIE WHO WAS WITH GOD ONLY KNOWS **WHO** AND **HOW MANY** PEOPLE!

YOUR **CARELESSNESS** DESTROYED YOUR LIFE, KAREN -- NOT SOME DEMON-CHILD! AND THAT CARELESSNESS MAY HAVE DESTROYED **MY** LIFE TOO, FOR ALL WE KNOW!

SO YOU WANT TO **BLAME** SOMEONE?! THEN BLAME **YOURSELF!**

GOD...

HELP ME.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOUR GAME IS, OLD MAN -- BUT I KNOW SOMEONE WHO CAN HELP ME FIND OUT.

AND WHEN I DO...

...YOU'RE GOING TO PAY...

WE'LL TALK PRICE IN A MOMENT. FIRST, THE PARAMETERS OF YOUR TASK: I ASK ONLY THAT YOU DELIVER THE INFANT TO ME, AND INFLICT MAXIMUM DAMAGE TO WHEREVER YOU FIND THE WHELP... AND TO WHOMEVER HAS BEEN HIDING IT.

EXCEPT THE VIGILANTE HIMSELF -- HE IS TO BE LEFT ***ALIVE.*** BATTER HIM AS MUCH AS IT PLEASES YOU, THOUGH -- I UNDERSTAND YOU HAVE A FEW AXES TO GRIND.

IT ***IS,*** AFTER ALL, THE MAIN REASON I SOUGHT OUT A ***KILLER*** TO PERFORM WHAT IS ESSENTIALLY A *BAGMAN'S* JOB -- YOUR ***HISTORY*** WITH THE INFANT'S CARETAKER.

FOR THIS SERVICE, I'M PREPARED TO OFFER YOU FIVE MILLION DOLLARS.

DO WE HAVE AN AGREEMENT?

SIR?

FLP

CRACK

Pp

CHK

I'M SORRY...

FUP

The CATCHER in the RYE

I HAD TO MARK MY PLACE.

YES -- WE HAVE A DEAL.

"A classic!" -Bryan Johnson

"Awesome!" -Walt Flanagan

"A spellbinding tale." -Scott Mosier

"Too many words, man." -Jay

ZONE EMPIRE